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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 172 February 10th, 1943

DEAR MEMBER,

A good deal of evidence reaches us about the state of religion in this country; but, as I pointed out recently, one can never tell how widely it applies. Percentages are the problem. I was, therefore, very glad to receive from Mass-Observation the offer of a Supplement, based on enquiries on which they have been engaged over a period of years. The organization and aims of Mass-Observation are explained in a foot-note to the Supplement. Before the war one of their units spent three years in a northern industrial town investigating the habits of the people. The results of the study were to have been published in four volumes, dealing respectively with religion, politics, the public-house and the holiday resort of Blackpool; but the plan had to be abandoned on account of the war.[1]

The evidence on which the Supplement is based includes interviews with a random sample of the population, selected with due regard to age, sex and class, statements from members of the national panel referred to in the article, and chance conversations of investigators with persons met in the street, public-house or shop. Whatever the limitations of the enquiry, it covers a wider field, and the results are based on fuller data, than anything else available. It gives as good a picture of the class of facts with which it is concerned as we can hope to get in present circumstances.

The results confirm the evidence from the Forces that not more than 10 per cent of the population are actively connected with any Church. The Christian mind has not yet adjusted itself to the startling fact that 90 per cent of our people have drifted away from organized religion, or have never had any connection with it. On the other hand, the enquiry shows that four times as many people as have a vital association with the Churches still wish to claim some connection, and that another 40 per cent of the population profess some sort of vague religious belief. Only a fifth of the whole have explicitly rejected religion altogether, though this is twice as common among younger people as among older. The Supplement rightly warns us that, while these facts represent the existing state of things, conditions may swiftly change.

We are on less sure ground when we pass to opinions about religion and its present or future influence. What those whose views are recorded are talking about is religion as it has come within their experience or observation. To know what they really mean one would have to know what they understand by religion and what they expect it to do for them or for society, and whether what they expect is the same as what Christianity intends, offers and demands. But within these limits the typical opinions quoted shed an interesting light on what is in people's minds.

[1] One of the four volumes has, however, just appeared under the title, *The Pub and the People* (Victor Gollancz Ltd., 16s.).

SHELTERED RELIGION

The following letter from a man in the Army is a criticism of my Christmas News-Letter. I could argue in defence of what I wrote, but I admit that the attack gets home. Those of us in religious and academic pursuits cannot be reminded too often of the danger of solving problems to our own satisfaction in the sphere of thought, or on paper, or in a sheltered existence, without taking account of the hard realities of life as it bears on those in less privileged positions.

" May a subscriber to C.N-L. who greatly appreciated your comments on General Fuller's article in the *Sunday Pictorial* and on Donald Mackinnon's air-bombing criticisms express some disappointment at the tone underlying your Christmas message? Before I joined the Forces I noticed a tendency to revert to the kind of pietism which comfortably confirms the unreflecting Christians in their unanalyzed prejudices. I am far from accepting my barrack-room comrades' criticisms of the Churches literally, but my experience here only reinforces my misgiving of the way, for instance, you interpret Reinhold Niebuhr.

" If I had my typewriter I could work out my criticism of your Christmas message in smoother fashion, but my recollection of the clergyman's home in which I was brought up suggests that in that sheltered setting ' Christian forbearance ' is too often exercised to the point where church people never experience the knowledge of how they themselves are regarded—and often with justification—by the ' secular world.' So I hope you will forgive me if I speak bluntly.

" It strikes me you miss the painful point with which Niebuhr confronts Christians in their wishful assurance that ' Christian ethics ' are sufficient to change the world. During his pastoral experience at Detroit he found that the workmen at Ford's factory appreciated the tough realities of the power situation which passed unnoticed by professional Christians. The danger of your Christmas message is that it tends to confirm a lot of privileged persons (theological students, dons and others, spared the brunt of life in the commercial world or in the Army) in views which have their significance only when related to realistic experience of life outside university colleges and vicarages. Your Christmas message nowhere departs from the realm of generalities.

" Why not stop talking about post-war planning and for a change discuss power politics in relations between individual men? On that plane the comments of my mates here—bricklayers and others—are much shrewder than those of many theologians. The ' listlessness ' of which the R.A.F. chaplain complains is the natural reaction to the collapse of the easy moralism which clergy have so long preached. In the light of historical perspective God triumphs, but right here and now ' keeping your own end up ' is an immediate need. The moralistic comments of the London press, which assume that men are motivated by idealism rather than self-interest, can be traced to the deficiencies of theological exposition."

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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